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Next 1 Page(s) In Document Denied

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C.I.A. Accused of Tolerating Killings in Honduras

By JAMES LeMOYNE
Special to The New York Times

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Feb. 12 — The Central Intelligence Agency aided Honduran security forces that it knew were responsible for having killed a number of people they detained for political reasons between 1981 and 1984, according to two American officials and a Honduran military officer.

The C.I.A. agents did not directly take part in actions by the Honduran Government units, the two American officials said. The help they provided included training and advice in intelligence collection as part of a program to cut off arms shipments from Nicaragua to leftist rebels in Honduras and El Salvador.

"The C.I.A. had nothing to do with picking people up," said one of the American officials, who has intimate knowledge of American policy in Honduras. "But they knew about it and when some people disappeared, they looked the other way."

Abuses Appear to Stop

An American official said the political killings troubled some members of the American Embassy and the C.I.A. Although embassy human rights reports at the time mentioned abuses, they minimized the extent and seeming systematic nature of the killings, officials said.

As many as 200 people, almost all of them suspected leftists, may have been killed or made to disappear for political reasons in Honduras between 1981 and 1984. It is not clear how many were killed by the units in question.

Since a new Honduran military commander ordered an end to the practice a year and a half ago, the abuses appear to have virtually stopped.

According to the two American officials and to Congressional sources, the C.I.A. used intelligence collected by Honduran security forces to cut the flow of arms sharply. The officials, both of whom served in the American Embassy at the time, said the program, strongly backed by the Reagan Administration, was considered a major success. The officials asked that they not be identified in order to protect their careers.

Honduran and Salvadoran leftists conceded in recent interviews that most of the victims were involved in arms trafficking.

Two Honduran sources and an American official said Argentine military advisers, as well as Nicaraguan anti-Government guerrillas, were also responsible for a number of the killings and disappearances of leftists.

Asked to comment on reports of killings by Honduran units that were aided by the C.I.A., Michael O'Brien, a spokesman for the United States Embassy in Honduras, issued a prepared statement drafted with the aid of State Department officials in Washington. The statement said:

"There is no connection between specific professional training which may have been provided by the United States Government to Honduran security forces and charges that Honduran security personnel subsequently may have engaged in improper activity. At no time has there been any United States Government involvement in supposed death squad activities."

Silent on Inquiry

Asked to comment on a report that there may have been a secret United States Government investigation of abuses by the Honduran security forces, Mr. O'Brien declined to do so. "This is an intelligence issue on which, as a matter of policy we do not comment," he said.

A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington, Patti Volz, denied any C.I.A. involvement with any group that may have killed or caused the disappearance of people it detained. The Honduran Army issued a report last year absolving itself of blame for most of the reported abuses.

The United States Ambassador in Honduras at the time of the killings, John D. Negroponte, declined to comment on the embassy's knowledge or concern about such abuses.

A Honduran military officer who is now dead reportedly told Congressional staff members in 1984 of C.I.A involvement with a Honduran Army unit that the officer charged was guilty of abuses.

Accounts of the meeting were given by Dick McCall, a foreign policy aide to Senator John F. Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Bruce Cameron, former legislative director of Americans for Democratic Action. They said in telephone interviews from Washington that the officer, Maj. Ricardo Zuñiga, had charged that the C.I.A. helped set up a secret Honduran intelligence unit known as the 316 Battalion. Major Zúñiga contended the unit was guilty of killings and disappearances, they said.

The accounts of Major Zuñiga's statements could not be further confirmed because he was killed last year by a business associate who owed him money.

Killings Are Selective

Unlike the mass slayings carried out by the Guatemalan and Salvadoran armies in recent years, the political killings in Honduras appear to have been highly selective. A number of Honduran political analysts view this as further evidence that the killings involved trained units under tight supervision.

When asked recently what had become of suspected leftists in Honduras, an officer in the Honduran Public Security Forces said they might be quietly regrouping for new attacks. "Or maybe we already cut all their heads off," he said, drawing a finger across his throat.

The killings began, according to American and Honduran sources, when it was discovered that safehouses in Honduras were being used to supply leftist rebels there and in El Salvador with arms from Nicaragua and after a number of guerrilla bombings and kidnappings between 1980 and 1982.

The Reagan Administration and the head of the Honduran Army, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, declared at the time that they were determined to cut these supplies and, according to several American officials, the Administration began an arms interdiction program.

More Active C.I.A. Role

General Alvarez, who was ousted in 1984 and went into into exile in the United States, worked closely with the C.I.A., several American and Honduran sources said. A graduate of the Argentine military academy, the general was strongly anti-Communist.

He brought Argentine experts in counterterrorim to Honduras in 1980 to train Honduran security forces and Nicaraguan anti-Government guerrillas, according to rebel, American and Honduran sources. The Argentines said they had previously helped run government death squads in Argentina that eliminated thousands of leftists there, according to a Honduran military officer who met them.

According to one American official, the C.I.A. may have helped finance some of the Argentine training. The C.I.A. later took a more active role, directly helping Honduran intelligence units, he said.

According to both an American and a Honduran official, the C.I.A. also had contacts with a Nicaraguan guerrilla counterintelligence unit. Senior Honduran Army officers charged last years that the Nicaraguan rebels were responsible for a number of the killings and disappearances of leftists.

The killings eventually became a political issue in Honduras. Such killings had been commonplace in neighboring El Salvador for years but had never been the custom in Honduras.

After General Alvarez was deposed, the army conducted an internal investigation in which it acknowledged that abuses had occurred, but blamed Nicaraguan rebels for almost all of them.

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